

A Brother's Choice

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A Brother's Choice

by [Admiranda](#)

Summary

Once upon a time, there was a genius and his friend, who thought more fondly of each other than friend could cover, although they had yet to admit it to each other. The genius, thinking wistfully on days when they were younger, had been struck by an idea then. After some experimentation he had created a talisman that essentially created a door to another time, where one longing to see a long lost face could go and see that person again, and return back at the end. After all, he was not interested in reliving those long, painful years even if he could change some things for the better. Once had been more than enough.

He offered it to his dear friend first, thinking of a young woman who had inspired and sheltered them both in times of turmoil “Wen Ning, you could see your sister again! You should get the chance first, then you can tell me if it's safe for me and Lan Zhan to use it as well.”

So he had taken the chance, to wander back many many years, to when they were children, and the world was simpler. But he didn't tell Wei Wuxian of all of his plans back in this time.

Notes

For the Bunnies' Central's Exploring Tropes: Time Travel. This fic fought me for most of the month that I worked on it, but I'm slipping in right at the buzzer!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

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It was probably cold out, but he hadn't noticed it in a long time. Definitely there were snowflakes drifting in the air, landing on his hands and not melting away. He'd forgotten how even before everything happened how gray Yiling could be. Gray wood, gray skies, the dark gray shadows of the Yiling Barrows looming over everything.

Wei-gongzi had given him a very sturdy cloak before he went back. “I don't know how people will react to you if they see your face, so you should wear this.” he'd clucked and made sure that the ties were easy enough even for his stiff fingers to pull on and undo. “When you're ready to come back, just fill in these lines and it'll activate,” and he'd tucked the recall talisman into a pouch that he then put up against his chest. “Say hi to Wen Qing for me.”

He thought it would have some sort of strange feeling, traveling through time, but maybe that wouldn't affect him anymore. When he closed his eyes, Wei-gongzi had been standing in front of him, smiling but also a little nervous. When he opened them again, he was in the same woods, but alone.

He had told Wei Wuxian that he would go see his sister and parents first, but he had lied, just a little. He had other plans, hatched the moment that he heard he could interact with the world instead of just watch it. Qishan was barely a day's travel from where he was, but instead he turned towards the southeast, towards a little town surviving in shadows. Unhindered by darkness, he mostly traveled at night, his resentful aura scaring away scavengers otherwise possibly interested in trying to eat his feet again.

He didn't much like that.

Even many miles away, he could feel the malice of the Barrows singing in the back of his mind, a never-ending chorus of death and hatred. He had forgotten how angry it used to be,

back before Wei-gongzi and the remnants of his family scrabbling to create life from the dead had retaught it humanity, tamed the worst of the fury.

He had only mentioned his first time in this place offhandedly when they were selling radishes in the market. *"Look, Wen Ning,"* he'd said, gesturing wildly at a corner of crumbling bricks with a small hole going under the remains of the building, *"That's where I slept until Jiang-shushu came and found me,"* he'd said with a grin only barely stretched thin, *"there was something about that corner that the dogs didn't like, so I would hide there if they started chasing me."*

He owed it to Wei-gongzi to go and find his younger self, take him somewhere safe, where he could grow up happy and loved, not treated as a burden for needing care. Not back to Yunmeng though never back to Yunmeng, he thought darkly, he had already seen what their care consisted of. Even now, rumors and dropped fragments of memories of his time there fueled his anger when he needed it to protect Wei Wuxian.

His family's dwellings were only a few day's travel from Yiling, even accounting for slowed travel with a child at his side. His memories of them had dimmed over the years, but he was certain if he asked them to, explained things well enough, they would take him in and care for him. Certainly his younger self would be very happy to have a big brother.

Some things hadn't changed much over the years. The people of Yiling were still withdrawn, still wary of strangers. The fact that he refused to let anyone look too closely at his face didn't do much to soften their opinions, but he didn't need them to. He had a mission to complete.

The sky above had gone that dark fuzzy gray of an oncoming snowstorm, people around him were closing up stalls, shutting doors and starting fires to burn away the chill. Around him, small chimneys let out soft clouds of wood smoke.

He walked slowly through the alleys, looking for small figures that other people would overlook, turning away from those more in need than them. He couldn't quite recognize the one corner Wei-gongzi had pointed out, but he checked them all anyway.

Then he heard the sound of a low snarl behind him and something slammed into the back of his legs. "S-sorry mister!" he heard a tiny voice yelp before letting go and running ahead.

Slowly, he turned around as the snarl echoed again. Behind him, a large black dog with its teeth bared stalked forwards, ribs showing through its patchy fur. It only hesitated slightly as he glared down at it, pulling at the ties on his cloak so it fell off his shoulders and left his arms free to respond.

Wen Ning had been the sort as a child to pick up turtles stuck on their back, bring every baby bird fallen out of the nest to his big sister because she could fix *anything*. Their mother had called him a gentle spirit, their father had been proud that despite his frequent illnesses that it had never depleted his heart. Called him a healing soul.

But none of that had saved his family, saved him. His healers hands were stained with blood and very little of it he had regretted. The dog was an innocent soul too, it was hungry.

But it wanted to eat the boy who would become the man who had saved him, the brother of his heart. So it had to die.

He grabbed it around the neck, lifting it into the air as it yelped loudly, feet flailing in the air as it snapped furiously to try and bite him back. Then it stopped and went limp in his arms as he snapped its neck in one motion, a healer's mercy in his bloodied hands.

He dropped its body in the snow in time to catch one of its packmates leaping at him, teeth sinking into his arm hard enough to break bone. Unfortunately he didn't care if his bones were broken. That one got slammed into the wall as it slid down to join its friend on the cold ground. Two more sets of glittering eyes were at the entrance to the alley, hesitating.

He glared back at those glittering eyes and roared, a sound that could chill the blood of any not used to him. It was no different for the street dogs, the eyes disappeared after a second into the swirling flakes.

When he was sure they had gone, he knelt down stiffly to make sure that the one he'd flung into the wall was dead too, laying it next to its friend and bowing his head over both of them. "I am sorry you had to die, but I couldn't let you do what you wanted to do." he told both of them, hoping their spirits would understand that it was just one predator against another.

A soft sound behind him had him turn around quickly, forgetting his cloak wasn't on and whoever was behind him could see his gray pallor. Huge eyes in a hungry face looked at him in surprise, a still oozing bite mark on one of his thin arms. "M-mister?" the boy asked, looking up at him in mixed emotions, "d-did you kill the d-dogs?"

He nodded stiffly. Wei-gongzi hadn't told him how timid he must have been on the street, there was almost none of the confidence he associated with his friend. "They were going to hurt you, so I stopped them." he said, keeping his voice slow and mellow. A shiver racked his friend's small body and he reconsidered a little as to whether the stammering was from nervousness. "Are you cold?"

The boy nodded, his eyes wary and hopeful. He did his best to smile, but it was hard to move those muscles on his face enough to make it comforting. "My cloak is very strong and warm, it will help," he knelt down slowly and shook the gathering snow off of it.

Wei Ying nodded, but hung back still, looking over him as he made up his mind on what to do. He searched his memory for the bits of his past that Wei-gongzi would sometimes let slip here and there, never all at once, but like scattered pearls on the ocean floor, easy to miss if you weren't listening closely. "It's okay A-Ying, I want to help."

At the sound of his name, Wei Ying lit up like the sunrise, a child's version of the smile he was used to spreading across his face. "Did you know my parents?" he asked even as he came forwards to be wrapped up in the cloak. Immediately Wen Ning was aware of how little it was just to do that, but he hadn't thought about all the things he would need to make sure that a little Wei-gongzi would need before he decided on the best place to leave him.

Also Wei Ying was looking up at him, waiting for his answer with trust in his eyes. “W-well I know they would want me to help you out?” he said at last, his voice rising in nervousness, “I didn't get to meet them, but I know they wouldn't want you to be living here on the street, running from dogs.”

Wei Ying brushed at his nose in thought and then pulled the cloak tighter around himself. After a few seconds, he looked up again. “Okay, you're weird, mister, but you're also nice.”

He tried to smile again and judging by Wei-gongzi's face, he succeeded this time. He stood up and looked around, only to see the snow growing heavier. “Would you let me carry you?” he asked after he thought about it for a moment, “we'll go find a better place to stay than out here.”

He waited while Wei Ying thought it over, still shivering even though he was wrapped up in his cloak. After a bit, he nodded and carefully reached up his arms, grimacing when the fabric fell over the fresh mark on his arm.

Wen Ning picked him up, getting him adjusted so that it was more like he was sitting down rather than having to hang on. The cloak hung down past his bare feet- no wonder he was still shivering if he didn't have any shoes when it was snowing out- so he awkwardly twisted it around and swung it up onto his lap. Wei Ying giggled and pulled it closer. “You're so tall, mister. No dogs could get me up here.”

“I will protect you from any dog,” he vowed as he pulled his senses from the dissonant song of the Barrows to focus on going somewhere else, somewhere warmer. “Are-are you comfortable, A-Ying?” he asked as Wei Ying shifted around a bit before resting his head on his shoulder.

“Mmhmm,” he said softly, “I'm not cold anymore.”

I am sorry, Wei-gongzi, he thought as he shifted his arm just a bit more so that his friend's younger self was supported and safe, But I'm going to be here a bit longer than I said.

He walked through the night and the snow until both faded into a watered out sunrise and the long sloping hills of Yunmeng. While Yiling was on the border of both Qishan and Yunmeng, he would have had to skirt too close to the Barrows for his comfort in Wei Ying's safety and so he chose the longer route down through Yunmeng and back around.

Wei Ying had fallen asleep wrapped up in the cloak a few hours in, sleeping soundly despite the occasional jolt when he discovered a hole in the ground with his foot in the dark. A small farm by itself yielded a few vegetables in their little shed when he broke the lock with his fingers, vegetables that were tucked inside his robes until Wei Ying woke up so he could eat. “I will find you better food later,” he promised the sleeping child as they left the farm behind. “But jiejie w-would tell me that it is easier to survive with limited food than no food.”

He stopped again once the sun was in the sky and he'd found a river with ice along the bank and frozen mud that didn't sink under his feet when he stepped on it.

Wei Ying woke up when he set him on the ground, pulling his bare toes inside the cloak as he felt the cold around him. “Gege?” he asked sleepily, rubbing at one eye, “why have we stopped?”

Wen Ning waded into the water, breaking the ice around him as he bent over to start looking at the plants growing on the edge. Shíluó preferred drier soil, but sometimes he found particularly stubborn plants growing on the edge of the water anyway. His family would have much better supplies on hand, but he wanted to make sure that infection didn't have a chance to set in. “I am looking for a plant,” he told the curious boy watching his every step, “y-you have several bites on your l-legs and arms. I would- would like to make sure that they heal well.”

“Oh,” Wei Ying said in that trailing off way that meant he would have many questions once he decided where to start. He took those few seconds while he was still thinking to wade further up stream, looking for feathery thin leaves most likely folding in on themselves. “Are you a healer then?”

“I trained as one,” he answered, too focused on his task to look over, “I still remember m-much of it.”

“Would you teach me?” was Wei Ying's next question and he looked over in surprise. He was still bundled up tightly in the cloak, but the hood had fallen off of his head so it was easier to see his face, wide eyed and curious. “I want to be able to make people better when they're hurt.”

He wished he could still smile at him without his frozen muscles getting in the way. “I w-will take you to someone who can teach you,” he promised instead, “th-there is a family who specializes in- in healing cultivation and medicine. Th-they will take care of you.”

Wei Ying frowned at him, “will you be there too?” he asked, his lower lip slowly sliding out in a pout, “do you live there?”

He hesitated as a few more feet upstream he thought he saw the leaves he was looking for, wilted for the winter but still with limited properties left. “I-I am a corpse,” he said as he splashed up towards the feathery fronds, “I can't live anywhere. But- but they will trust me and take care of you.”

Wei Ying looked unconvinced, but sat still as he stiffly picked the brightest of the plants out of the frozen ground. “Why can't I stay with you?”

Ah, even so young Wei Ying already had such a strong will and knew his own mind. He really had to think of an argument that would convince him without telling him everything that happened to him. “I am a traveler, not from here,” he started and walked back down, the fragile plants cradled in his fingers so he wouldn't bruise them before he was ready. “In- in fact I-I am from another time.”

He knelt down in front of Wei Ying and motioned for him to hold out one of his arms so he could take a look at it, “I-I have a friend who made a talis- made a talisman so I could come see m-my family again for a while, but I can't stay here.”

The boy obediently held out his left arm, a slightly older bite mark standing out on his forearm, “You have to go back to your own world?” he asked, the tone more problem solving than upset, “and you don't have a way to stay?”

He shook his head as he studied the redness around the mark. No serious infection, but it still had dirt on it. He would have to clean it with the cold water here. “N-no,” he lied, a little, “I have m-my family waiting for me. But I will not leave you alone by yourself again,” he promised fervently, “I-I know the family I am taking you to. The m-mother and father are healers, much better than me. They have a little g-girl who is learning healing as well. Sh-she is very good at it. She can be a l-little gruff, but she's really nice.”

Wei Ying's face smoothed in interest as he listened. Wen Ning handed him a small branch of shíluó, “Chew on this, then put all of the pulp on the bite.”

He obeyed and made a face at the taste of the plant, but obediently spat out a wad of chewed plant chunks onto his arm and rubbed it into the bite mark. After a moment, something in his face cleared up. “It's hurting less now.”

“Good,” he said encouragingly, “where are the other bites?”

He pulled his other arm out of the cloak, shivering a little bit. “One more right here,” he pointed to the freshest one he must have gotten back in that alley from the dogs he killed, “three on my legs.”

He frowned inwardly as he saw the angry red lines already forming around this one. Hopefully the shíluó would stave off the worst of the infection until he could get him to his family where they had much better plants on hand to treat this. He put the plants down on Wei Ying's lap, staggered to his feet and brought over cupped cold water in his hands, “This needs to be cleaned, I'm sorry it will hurt.”

Wei Ying shook his head and kept his arm out. “You're going to make it better,” he said with all the certainty in the world shining in his gap-toothed smile.

He ducked his head away from the compliment and poured the water over the bite, following up by handing him a bigger sprig of plant to chew up and put on, “w-would you like to hear m-more about where we're going?”

Wei Ying nodded eagerly, his mouth full of plants. Wen Ning waited patiently until he'd got them ready and rubbed them into the bigger mark on his arm, watching in approval as the plant juices soaking into the cut soothed the angry red a little bit. “Th-they live in a v-valley where a large river runs through, and they grow all the plants like these that heal people and store them. Many people have come to them for h-help because they f-feel like healers should take c-care of those in need, regardless of why.” he told him, drawing on old memories from a lifetime ago, “th-they also have a little boy about a y-year younger than you. Right n-now, his biggest am-ambition is to have a big brother.”

Wei Ying giggled “really?” And then in a much smaller voice threaded with hope, “maybe I could be his big brother?”

“Yes, I think he would like that,” he said in the warmest voice he could manage, “I think he would like that very much.”

Later on, he would realize it was because he was used to Jiang-gongzi's Yunmeng where cultivators only intervened in matters that had led to a death and rarely left their gaudy fortress, but at the time he couldn't think of why his guard wasn't up higher walking through Yunmeng. Perhaps it was because of the winter chasing everyone inside, perhaps it was because there was very little danger left that could truly harm him.

Perhaps it was simply that all of his instincts were trained on making sure that Wei Ying was warm enough and comfortable as he carried him across the dry fields.

He heard them coming first, not that they were trying to be stealthy. Crunching through the dry underbrush and laughing, at first he wasn't too concerned until the subtle smell of the aftermath of thunder reached his nose, a smell he immediately associated with danger.

Zidian.

He had forgotten that they were in Yunmeng and even before Jiang Wanyin had stepped up, there was a cruel cultivator that wielded the lightning whip as an extension of her anger, lashing out at everyone.

Wei Ying was still curled up on the ground under his cloak, in very deep sleep with a full belly. He didn't stir when he called his name, he didn't stir when he gently shook him.

He stopped out the remains of their fire and instead of continuing to try, carefully bundled him up tighter in the cloak and picked him up, tucking his head securely against his chest even though he was still cold himself. "Sorry to move you, A-Ying, but we should not stay here while she is around."

Wei Ying made a little noise and pressed himself closer as he looked up at the dark sky, trying to find the northern star. The tree branches blotted out most of the light overhead, but he stared up and chose a direction, turning around and heading back towards Qishan.

The woods wound and twisted and they'd long since lost the road when he came into a clearing. Stopping to look up again and make sure Wei Ying was comfortable in his arms, he didn't hear them coming till Zidian hummed behind him and he jumped hurriedly to avoid the whip coming down on his back.

High, cold laughter rang through the clearing. "Oh, this one's not as stupid as the rest," Madam Yu said, the purple light from her whip making her look like a demon in the dark. "Yinzhu!"

The air whipped around him as he jumped again when her companion lashed out with a long dagger near his chest, far too close to Wei Ying for his comfort.

"Mistress, it is holding something," the woman said, circling around him in the darkness. "A bundle."

Wen Ning pulled him closer, feeling him stiffen as he accidentally squeezed him a little tightly. "Sorry A-Ying," he whispered, "I p-promise it will be over soon."

Wei Ying shifted a little in his arms as he kept backing up, keeping one eye on Madam Yu and the other on her first servant, “gege?” he asked blearily, “is everything okay?”

He didn't get a chance to respond as the long violet whip lashed out again, propelling its wielder forwards. Quickly he shifted Wei Ying's weight to one arm just in time to catch her other servant's arm, bending her wrist backwards until it cracked loudly and the dagger fell to the ground. She yelped in pain and retreated quickly. “Mistress, it is trying to protect the child,” she gritted out, her pain only visible in the crackling purple light haunting the whole clearing.

“Is it now?” she asked and if he were still alive, a chill would have run down his spine at that smile. “No matter, it's still a prize!”

The whip came down so fast he only had enough time to turn and catch it on his back, the lightning burning through his dead nerves and through to the ground. In his arms, Wei Ying cried out in pain as some of the crackling lightning managed to still catch him on the shoulder, shaking in pain from just the edge of one blow.

They *hurt* him.

Time slowed around him as battle instinct set in, his higher thoughts clearing to simple motivations. Carefully, he set Wei Ying on the ground, the boy not hesitating and bolting for safety as he turned back towards the people who had ceased to be anything in his mind other than enemy.

They moved towards him in a pack, three hunters on the prowl, but they had challenged the wrong prey. One of them was already weaker than the others, her arm tucked against her chest to protect it from further harm. She would be the easiest to deal with.

They moved around him like water, but he had learned how to catch water in his numb fingers. The other of the two servants stepped too close when trying to cut at his throat, so he caught her in the same place, lifting her into the air as the other two stepped back hurriedly. Only now had they realized what they were in for.

It was too late now. They had tried to hurt Wei Ying. Had, in fact hurt him.

He would not forgive such a thing.

He reached deep within himself, that spinning pool of hurt, of resentment, of anger and roared his rage to the heavens. The woman with her throat in his hand scrabbled desperately, knives lost in the fight for survival as he squeezed harder and harder. “Yinzhu!” the other servant cried out, charging at him with one blade up.

A sharp snap rang through the night air as he twisted his hand harshly, ending her struggles rather than leave her alive to get back in the way again. Then, he threw the body into the other woman, the meaty sound of their collision a mild distraction as he leaped forwards to that bright whip in the darkness, now a liability instead of an asset.

She raised her hand and swung her arm down hard, sending the violet whip coiling around his arm. He let her, let the energy shudder through his undead body before reaching through the thunder to grab her around the wrist.

The weakest point of a whip was its wielder after all. Zidian's energy thrashed violently as she pulled against him, but to let her go was to let Wei Ying be in danger again and he was *done* with Wei Ying being hurt. By her, by the Wens, by Jin Guangshan, by her dishonorable, disrespectful, monstrous future child.

“Jinzhu! Yinzhu!” she snapped, the lightning snapping at his arm, his chest, his face. None of that mattered. “You- useless! Stop him!”

He listened for a second to make sure they were still tangled in each other, then thrust his hand through her breast, still holding onto her wrist so she couldn't pull away before he was finished. Hot blood poured over his arm as she choked and spit. “You-you-” she managed, and then went limp, sliding off of his hand onto the ground as Zidian returned to its resting form, no spiritual energy left to feed on.

Her resentment coiled around him for a moment, but she always let it all out no matter what triggered it and his was buried deep. She could not touch him.

She could never hurt Wei Ying again.

A little way away, the one remaining had detangled herself from the body of her companion, holding her wrist even more gingerly against her body now that he'd broken it further with a body. Now without the light of Zidian, he could only make her out by the sliver of moonlight in the clearing.

She immediately turned and fled, but he was faster, pushing up with all the strength in his legs to leap towards her before she could escape his range. Her cry for help was cut short by his fist through her lungs, waiting for her to go limp and bloodless before shaking her body off.

The night was deathly silent.

As his rage started to cool, he tried to rub the worst of the blood and gore off of his arms onto a nearby tree, trying to feel the ghost of the bond between him and Wei Ying. “A-Ying?” he called, making sure his voice didn't shake. “It's over now.”

There was a long pause in which his fear slowly grew as he looked around, trying to spot the small figure huddled in a cloak much too large for him, till he heard a very soft upset noise behind him.

He turned around slowly, keeping his arms down at his side and kneeling stiffly as Wei Ying cautiously approached him, looking at the bodies multiple times. “I-is it over?” he asked at last,

“Yes,” Wen Ning said slowly, “are you still hurting at all?”

He shook his head rapidly, "It just stung for a moment, it didn't hit my bites. Why did they want to hurt you so bad?" he burst out in distress, "you didn't do anything to them! They just kept attacking you even when you were trying to leave!"

He sighed, "Some people are very cruel," he said, reaching out and brushing stiffly at his cheeks the way that Wei Wuxian would sometimes when they were talking, "some people refuse to see kindness as anything other than a weakness. But they are wrong." he said vehemently, picking him up again and hoping the lingering scent of blood wouldn't disturb him too much. "t-to be kind is to remember that o-other people hurt too. And some-sometimes it is worth it, even if they are hurting and lash out at first." He looked back at the bodies on the ground as something occurred to him and he went over to Madam Yu's body. "But sometimes, people have to be stopped because they won't stop hurting other people." His heart hardened again as he saw the delicate ring on her finger, a weapon of so much pain that had been used on the innocent, the helpless, his brother. "Sometimes the only kindness is to stop someone."

Wei Ying buried his face in his shoulder as he stomped down hard on her hand until the ring and many bones snapped beneath his feet.

Another day and night and it had grown so late as to be early again when he finally reached familiar grounds. The fields he ran through as a child, the herb gardens where he'd learned of medicine and poison, the river that marked their border. Rime lined the thin blades of grass that had yellowed and bent with the onset of winter and the sky was the light dove gray of snow to come again.

The ground crunched under his feet, but he pressed on, making sure Wei Ying was still breathing and warm in his arms and the cloak. He still hadn't decided what to tell his family to convince them of what they needed to do, the promise he had made to this boy in his arms, but he would figure it out. He had to.

This early in the morning, his family would be just starting to rise, and perhaps not even that what with the cold. There was little to do in the winter unless someone was in need of a healer.

There was always someone in need of a healer.

He steeled himself against the fear rising inside of his family's horror, of trying to explain things that he truly never wanted to think back on again. But he had a mission, one more important than any fear of his self.

Shifting Wei Ying back onto his side again, he knocked urgently on the door three times and waited.

From inside, he could pick up the faint sounds of curiosity, but such an event was not unusual, he remembered even when he was only old enough to watch curiously with his blanket clutched in his hands as his parents and sister ran around in smooth chaos.

At last the door latch gave and swung open to reveal his mother, a face he had not seen even long before he died.

He had forgotten how much his sister looked like her.

Her eyes went wide as she took in his gray skin, the black veins running up his neck and all the other signs that came with being a fierce corpse, but before she could scream he found his voice. "Wait, please...I need your help."

Her nostrils flared in shock and fear, but she tamped it down. He thought of what Wei Wuxian would do in such a situation and followed up before she could panic again. "I-I brought him here to you," he said and let the cloak fall off of Wei Ying's face to show him peacefully sleeping.

He grumbled and turned his face into Wen Ning's chest at the light invading his dreams. "Sorry, a-Ying," he whispered and pulled the cloak back over. Cautiously, he looked back up at his mother.

She still looked nervous, but swallowed her fear down and let her shoulders loosen. "Who are you?" she asked cautiously, looking over both him and his charge lightly snoring in his arms, "where did you two come from?" Behind her, he saw the figure of his father, only a shadow in the early morning light.

He couldn't tell her he was her son from near forty years on, after the Wen sect had fallen and she had died of illness before the sun set on the rest of them. "I am...just a ghost from a time that will no longer happen," he said at last, "but what little life I have left I owe to him, in a way." Gently he adjusted Wei Ying in his arms so he could hand him over to his father, already reaching out for the child. "Please, take him in, raise him well. He is so good, and I can't think of a place he would be happier." He paused nervously. "His name is Wei Ying. He is the son of Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze."

Their eyes went slightly wide at that. "He survived?" His mother said breathlessly. "We heard of their deaths and thought he was gone too."

Wen Ning felt his own surprise. He didn't know they knew of that little family. Somehow his father still read it on his face. "They helped us out one time on the road, we told them if they ever needed healing to come to us first and we would do what we could." Wei Ying didn't even stir as he settled him into his arms. "This is the least we can do."

The great tension in his body settled at last, knowing that they spoke no lies. "When he is of age, call him Wuxian, for no envies. He will carry no burden of guilt, no weight of debts, a life free to live how he wants." He smiled as best he could through his stiff muscles, "he-he was good to me before, despite how I am."

They both nodded slowly, obviously still scared, but that was okay. He was used to it. Wei Ying stirred and blinked in his father's arms, then shot awake in confusion. "Gege?" he called out. "Gege, what's happening?"

He did his best to make his face move enough to console him. "We are where I told you we were going," he said softly, "I have to go now."

It was better if he didn't linger too long, and let him meet his new siblings on his own. Besides, only one of the people to cause him the greatest pain in his life was dead. There were still a few left to deal with.

Sneaking through the Sun Palace was as easy as it had ever been. Easier, in fact, since there was no war on the horizon yet and thus someone who could walk silently through their halls was not a danger they were expecting.

Wen Ruohan was easily the most dangerous of the ones on his radar in terms of how much he could fight back, so he went to his chambers first. Wen Ruohan awoke to a cold hand crushing his heart and an empty face nevertheless scowling down at him. "I w-won't forgive you for what happened," the corpse whispered as the Chief Cultivator and Wen Sect Leader died a surprised death in his own bed with his blood dyeing the white blankets to match their clan colors.

Wen Xu and Wen Chao went nearly as quietly as their father and it wasn't till two more cousins he remembered for their cruelty in the war and dismissal of his sister had died that someone discovered the bodies, putting more people unfortunately in his path on his way out, leaving a string of apologies and bodies in his wake.

The Jin were no better prepared for a ghost to walk through their halls, although his quest for removing Jin Guangshan from the world was slightly delayed by the man being in the bed of another woman, but he died as ignobly as he lived, bleeding out on the floor of a brothel. At first he wondered if any others needed to die in the Jin sect for things to be better, but the power struggle that would result in his untimely death would likely do in the worst of them.

His vengeance was swift, bloody and exact. A healer should only kill the infection and let the body fight off the symptoms to grow stronger. It had been proven time and time again.

Wen Ning had many reasons why he should go back now, he had fulfilled his promise to protect Wei Wuxian's younger self and removed the worst obstacles in that path. He had made sure he was in a place where he would grow up loved and cherished not for his talents, but his kind heart.

But he had so many people leave without saying good bye, and had nearly done the same himself. He couldn't do that to any Wei Wuxian ever again, and he had done a poor job of it the first time.

So he went back home, robes damp from washing off the rest of the blood in a mountain stream and then walking through a sudden rainstorm. It was long after the haunting hour when he arrived, when the sunrise still had yet to crest the mountains and the sky was the warm gray of his cloak, but as he approached a lit window, he saw a small head look out and then disappear almost immediately. Somehow, he wasn't surprised a few seconds later to see A-Ying running through the door, barefoot and in new robes that looked very warm and soft. He still had wrinkles pressed into his cheek from sleep. "Gege!" he cried, throwing his arms

around Wen Ning's leg and squeezing tightly. "Please stay a little bit longer, gege!" A sob caught in his throat as Wen Ning tried to very gently dislodge him from his grip.

It was difficult to get him to let go, but he managed it by stiffly pulling him up into his arms so that A-Ying could wrap his arms around his neck and cling there instead, patting his back slowly as he started to cry. "A-Ying," he said slowly, trying to decide what would be the right thing to say so that he understood.

He knew that he would trust someone who came to rescue him from the long nightmare of living on the streets, but he hadn't realized how hard it would be in the end to actually leave.

"A-Ying," he began again as A-Ying pulled back and hiccupped, wiping at his eyes as if his tears frustrated him. "My friend...my gege is waiting for me to come home," he said at last. The words he had only thought, holding them close inside. "I can't stay forever."

A-Ying looked up at him with red around his gray eyes and a full on pout. "Please ask your gege to wait just a little bit longer." He curled up his fists in Wen Ning's cloak and looked down as he whispered, "I don't want you to leave like Mama and Baba did..."

It was hard for a dead heart to break, but his did at that moment and he pulled him back in closer in another stiff hug. "I..." he started and lost the words again. "I'm sorry A-Ying."

A-Ying shook his head and buried his face in his shoulder, fists curled up in his robes. When he let out a shiver, he shifted and undid the cloak with one hand, putting it around him again. "You don't have to be c-cold," he said gently when A-Ying looked up at him. "Y-you can keep this."

"Really?" he asked, his eyes wide. "But you'll be cold?"

He shook his head, "I'll be okay. My gege will get me another one," he said as he set him down, watching him dance uncomfortably on the cold ground. "Go back inside!"

A-Ying looked at the open door and pulled the cloak around him instead, still hopping from foot to foot. "No, not yet," he said, pouting stubbornly, "I'm gonna watch you go."

For just a moment, he could see the man he would grow up to be, proud and strong and confident and gentle and patient and so, so very *good*.

As he started to pull out the talisman that would take him home, the sound of running feet caught them by surprise as two faces he didn't expect to see appeared in the doorway. His young self was rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and his sister...

His sister was alive and scowling. "A-Ying!" she called, holding up a new pair of shoes and waving them. "Don't get frostbite! I can't fix that yet!"

A-Ying giggled and ran back over, pulling the cloak over him like a large blanket, "Sorry Qing-jiejie," he said, giggling again as she ruffled his hair and helped him to pull them over his numb toes. His younger self reached out and felt the cloak with big eyes. "Ying-gege," Wen Ning heard him breathe, "th-this is so *soft*!"

A-Ying grinned widely at the two of them. "It's from Gui-gege!" he told them proudly, pointing at Wen Ning standing outside. "He came to say good bye..."

His jiejie gave him another look with the same suspicion he remembered her reserving specifically for his sleeping droughts and Wen Chao, but evidentially decided he couldn't be too bad since he'd given a-Ying the cloak none of them could stop petting. His younger self waved shyly, but didn't try and talk to him. After a few minutes, Wen Qing picked up first Wei Ying, his younger self making sure the soft cloak wasn't dragging on the floor, before she slung him under her arm, staggering off with both of them and leaving the door open.

They would be okay. What would come next, he didn't know, but they would be okay. Even if they'd only known each other for a little while, he could already see a-Ying fitting into their space as if he'd always belonged there, loved and adored for who he was rather than who his parents were or what he could do.

He walked over and shut the door for them, then turned away and drew the missing lines on the talisman, closing his eyes again to let the strange shifting feeling settle around him.

The heat of the sun on his face told him he was back. A delighted laugh and clapping of hands told him he was home. He opened his eyes to see the adult Wei Wuxian in front of him with a wide grin on his face, in white robes today. It must have been hot enough for him to not be comfortable in his usual black. "Welcome back," he said cheerfully. "You were gone for two days, but you showed up at the same time you left, so that's good to know." Ever curious, he started walking around him in a circle, undoubtedly inspecting him for wayward twigs. "So, how was it? Any weird side effects I should know about before I take it for a spin?" he asked, grabbing the papers with his notes in them. "I'd like to know if I should expect to throw up or something when we land to go meet my mother in law."

He shook his head slowly. "N-nothing strange. It was...it was good to see them again." he managed. "I forgot a lot."

Wei Wuxian laughed a little ruefully, "that's why I made this, so that we can get a chance to remember them better." He paused and bit thoughtfully at his lower lip, crossing his arms as he chewed on some thought. "Did you want to stay? I know I set up a way for you to come back at any time, but you didn't have to."

"No," the sudden answer surprised even him as it came out more forcefully than he'd ever spoken against Wei Wuxian. "No, I-I was ready to c-come home," he explained, "it- it was good to see them, b-but- but they weren't really my family in the same way anymore."

His friend, the brother of his heart, lifted an eyebrow and smiled wryly, "Oh?" he asked in that way where he definitely knew the answer but wasn't going to step in and say it for him. "but your sister and parents were there."

He nodded, finally ready to say the words that had sat between them for so long. "B-but my brother wasn't, and I missed him." he said firmly, not missing the way that Wei Wuxian's eyebrows went up, and up. "I-I want to call you Ying-ge. Because you are m-my brother."

.Wei Wuxian looked at him speechlessly for a moment, mouth open in surprise before pulling him into a hug so tight he could feel his spine realign beneath it. He wrapped his arms back around him as well as he could, careful to not squeeze him too tightly. A long shudder of emotion ran through them, Wei Wuxian's breathing was slightly unsteady.

“I'm going to hold you too that, Ning-di,” he said at last, his voice carefully controlled. “No more Wei-gongzi or I'll get upset.”

He smiled with all of his heart into his brother's shoulder. “Okay.”

So Wen Ning returned to his own future, unable to return to see the changes he had wrought. Though sometimes his thoughts turned to the child form of his brother of the heart, he knew that all he could do was trust that the actions he had taken would lead to a better world. Without the cruelty of Madam Yu, the ambition of Wen Ruohan, the greed of Jin Guangshan, many, many things could not occur as they had.

But for everyone in that world, how were they to know what had been, once upon a time before a brother's choice changed everything? All they would ever know was the world they had been in.

So the world that went on was a world that knew nothing. For some, things moved on as they always had, and they didn't know how much would have changed without intervention. For some, there was a distinct loss that reshaped their world and they wondered how much better it would have been had such things never happened.

Who can say, after all? All it takes is one branch in the wrong place to divert the stream, a brother's choice born out of love and a heartfelt wish to not see things occur as they once did. Little ripples can stretch out so far that some things will never happen, and things that never could have happened before are seen as a certainty. It is impossible for any one person to see how far the ripples stretch after all.

But, some things may still happen as unlikely as it seems. Tiny points where the original weaving pokes out. Allow me to part the veils on this world one last time to show you such a moment.

It is early spring in the Cloud Recesses, several years after the month of chaos. In fact, it is time for the yearly class that the esteemed Lan Qiren holds every year for those he deems worthy of joining in. A small sect that only formed in the power vacuum of the Wen sect folding in on itself for several years as newly viable cousins struck out to stake their claim or break away entirely has received permission to send their sect heir and second son to study for three months.

Their elder sister is a renowned genius doctor who has chosen medicine and helping those in need of care over all else, but they adore her for it and remind her just that she is their beloved sister too. A tighter bond of siblings there could not be, and she specifically requested that they both get to go and grow in the wider world beyond their little territory.

It is an early spring day and two boys walk together up the long, winding stairs to the Cloud Recesses, eyes and minds open to a new world. One of them is still somewhat timid, but always braver with his favorite brother by his side, whose hands and heart are as steady and true as the swift arrows he's specialized in.

The other is very curious. Despite his hard past, he meets the world with an unwavering smile, learns everything he can get his hands on, and never takes off the worn, gently mended dark cloak he was given by someone who saw him alone in the snow and chose to be kind and change things for the better, just for him.

It is certain that no matter what happens from here on out, he will have a good life. It will likely be filled with bumps in the road, all lives are, but still he will be happy. It was his brother of the heart's most sincere, ardent wish that he grow up happy and loved. That he would always *be* happy and loved.

A world changed by such a wish, how could it not listen, just once?

End Notes

Shíluó = dill, which really is a good plant for staving off infection and helping heal cuts!
Random knowledge strikes again!

While I didn't directly copy it, my idea for the epilogue was very inspired by the ending of Kannazuki no Miko.

I have no plans to write anything else in this changed world, but if someone else is interested in following up, let me know! I'm curious to hear what you all think might change after such an event!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!